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Karen Blixen's "The Poet" and Søren Kierkegaard's *Gjentagelsen*

Abstract: It is commonly acknowledged within Karen Blixen scholarship that some of Blixen's tales are literary responses to other works from world literature. In this paper I will argue that the tale "The Poet" from *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934) should be included in this line-up of responses as a literary response to Søren Kierkegaard's *Gjentagelsen* (*Repetition*) from 1843. Through juxtapositions of quotes and analysis of plot development and character constellations, I will show how Blixen redevelops the plot and reverses the characters from Kierkegaard's *Gjentagelsen*. I will pay particular attention to a reoccurring character in Kierkegaard's production: the elderly bachelor esthete (Constantin Constantius), whom Blixen in "The Poet" exposes as a demonic, yet comical character. I will conclude by pointing out that repetition should be acknowledged as an integral part of Blixen's poetics, since she consistently repeats archetypal plots and characters from world literature in her works that at the same time are completely new and original, following the dialectics of repetition.

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Introduction

In two previous articles I have shown that Karen Blixen's "Carnival" (written 1926–27) is mostly a response to Søren Kierkegaard's "In vino veritas" from *Stadier paa Livets Vei* (1845) (*Stages on Life's Way*) and "Ehrengard" (1963) a response to "Forførerens Dagbog" ("The Seducer's Diary") from *Enten-Eller*. Første Deel (1843) (*Either/Or*, Part I).¹ In this article I will argue that Blixen's "The Poet" from *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934) ("Digteren", *Syv fantastiske fortællinger*, 1935) is also a literary response to Kierkegaard, in this case to his work *Gjentagelsen* (*Repetition*) from 1843. It is, however, important to pay attention to the fact that Blixen in her literary responses never directly mentions the literary pre-

¹ Bunch 2011 & Bunch 2013, et al.

decessor or the literary background text. Her responses always come in the shape of narratives that through allusions and reversals of plot- and/or character constellations carry a hidden interpretation of the characters and the story-world in the literary background text. For example, “The Heroine” from *Winter’s Tales* (1942) is a response to Maupassant’s famous short-story “Boule de suif” (1880) (“Ball-of-Fat”),² where Blixen’s heroine, contrary to Maupassant’s overweight character, is an incredibly beautiful, slim nude dancer, who triumphs over both the German officer and her fellow travellers, when Blixen reverses the character and the plot of Maupassant’s story.³ Blixen also mentioned in a letter late in life (1958) that “The Pearls” (*Winter’s Tales*) is a response to *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920–22): “‘En Historie om en Perle’, der i sin Tid er skrevet som en Slags Replik til Sigrid Undsets Mesterværk ‘Kristin Lavransdatter’” (Blixen 1996, 393).⁴ Scholars have so far agreed that “Ehrengard” is also a response too Kierkegaard’s “Forførerens Dagbog”, where, in the words of Blixen’s secretary Clara Selborn: “pigen ikke bliver tværet ud, som Cordelia hos Kierkegaard, men det bliver forførereren der står beskæmmet tilbage” (Selborn 2006, 77).

“The Poet” is, however, a complicated matter, since it on the surface primarily alludes to Johann Wolfgang Goethe, whom the Councilor in the story-world of the tale has met in Weimar. We also find a line-up of characters from Goethe’s major works to be mentioned directly in the tale⁵ obscuring the fact that *Gjentaelsen* is in fact the main target of the response. This is a strategy that Blixen repeats twenty-eight years after in the novella “Ehrengard”, where we also find the main character J. W. Cazotte to be modeled over J. W. Goethe and the tale to have numerous direct allusions to Goethe’s works, despite the fact that Kierkegaard’s “Forførerens Dagbog” is actually the main literary target. The title “Forførerens Dagbog” (or Kierkegaard) is never mentioned directly in “Ehrengard” and the connections are only established through allusions to passages in “Forførerens Dagbog” and through character-, plot reversal and name similarity (Johan/Johannes) (Langbaum 1964, Bunch 2013, et al.).⁶ In both “The

² Henriksen 1998, 232; Sørensen 2002, 24–25 & Selboe 2008: 25.

³ This is hidden behind the more obvious allusion to Abelard and Heloise that Blixen established in the Danish version, when she changed the title from “The Heroine” to “Heloïse”.

⁴ The story as a literary response to *Kristin Lavransdatter* has been treated more in depth by Aage Henriksen in Henriksen 1956, 17 & Henriksen 1998, 232

⁵ “She did not, he thought run the risk of Faust in asking the moment to stay because of it’s loveliness” (Blixen 1934, 407) and “Would the great poet let his own people – Wilhelm Meister, Werther, Dorothea – associate with the creations of his, the Councilor’s mind?” (ibid., 431).

⁶ More than twenty separate articles or book chapters have in various ways been treating “Ehrengard” as a response to Kierkegaard’s “Forførerens Dagbog” (Sørensen 2002, 190–199; Bunch 2013).

Poet” and in “Ehrengard” Blixen uses her own version of the Chinese puzzle composition system that Victor Eremita describes in the foreword to *Enten-Eller*. Første Deel as the main composition structure of “Forførerens Dagbog”: “idet den ene Forfatter kommer til at ligge inden i den anden som Æsker i et chinesisisk Æskespil” (Kierkegaard 1843a, XII) (“since one author becomes enclosed within the other like the boxes of a Chinese puzzle”) (Kierkegaard 1987, 9). Thus, when we open the first box in Blixen’s Chinese puzzle, behind Goethe, we find Kierkegaard. In the following I will argue that “The Poet” is a part of an overall line-up of responses to Kierkegaard’s works that Blixen made over a period of thirty-five years, with the two tales “Carnival” and “Ehrengard” as the frame around her œuvre and “The Poet” as the missing middle piece. Firstly, I will show how Blixen stages ideas from *Gjentagelsen* that are only suggested by the first person narrator Constantin Constantius but never carried out, secondly I will show how Blixen reverses the plot and develops the characters, and thirdly how she on a meta-level deals with the notions of poetry and repetition in “The Poet” as a response to *Gjentagelsen*. I will quote Blixen’s original English text “The Poet” but add Blixen’s own Danish translations from “Digteren” when the Danish version contains passages that pertains to Kierkegaard or otherwise sharpens or develops important ideas from the original English version.⁷ I will quote Kierkegaard’s *Gjentagelsen* from the original Danish text, followed by the English translation.

Structure and Composition: *Gjentagelsen* and “The Poet”

In a passage in *Gjentagelsen*, Constantin Constantius expresses the following about “det unge Menneske” (“the young man”) and the nature of his own narrative:

Hvis jeg udførligt vilde forfølge Stemningerne i det unge Menneske, saaledes som jeg lærte dem at kjende, endsige hvis jeg paa Digterviis vilde tage en Mængde uvedkommende Ting med: Dagligstuer og Gangklæder, skønne Egne, Paarørende og Venner, saa kunde denne Historie blive en alenlang Novelle. Det gider jeg imidlertid ikke. (Kierkegaard 1843b, 20)

⁷ In his afterword to the new Danish DSL edition of *Winter’s Tales* (2010), Danish Blixen scholar Poul Behrendt systematically uncovers how Blixen’s Danish translations of the tales differ from the original English versions, sometimes to an extent that borders reworkings (Behrendt 2010, 404–430).

If I were to elaborate on the young man's moods as I learned to know them, to say nothing of anecdotally including a host of irrelevant things – living rooms and wearing apparel, lovely localities, relatives and friends – this narrative could become an interminable story. That, however, I do not want. (Kierkegaard 1983, 141)

Karen Blixen's response to Constantin not caring about developing his narrative is to do the opposite. In "The Poet" she closely follows the moods of "det unge Menneske" as August von Schimmelmann calls the melancholy young poet Anders Kube (Blixen 1935, 364).⁸ Blixen does so by developing the passage in *Gjentagelsen* and "paa Digtervis" (as a poet, lost in the English translation) create a narrative that include "uvedkommende ting" (irrelevant things) and where "Dagligstuer" ("living rooms"), "Gangklæder" ("wearing apparel"), "skjønne Egne" ("lovely localities"), "Paarørende" ("relatives") and "Venner" ("friends") are indeed elaborately depicted. Even the title of the main character, the Councilor, and his behavior in Hirschholm seems to allude to a passage in *Gjentagelsen*:

Den, der vil Gjentagelsen, han er modnet i Alvor. Dette er mit Separat-Votum, der tillige mener, at det ingenlunde er Livets Alvor, at sidde i sin Sopha og stange Tænder – og være Noget f. Ex Justitsraad; eller at gaae adstadig gennem Gaderne – og være Noget, f. Ex Velærværdighed; ligesaa lidt som det er Livets Alvor at være kongelig Beridder. Alt Sligt er mine Øjne kun Spøg, og som stundom daarlig nok. (Kierkegaard 1843b, 6)

The person who wills repetition is mature in earnestness. This is my private opinion, and this also means that it is not the earnestness of life to sit on the sofa and grind one's teeth – and to be somebody, for example a councilor – or to walk the streets sedately – and to be somebody, His Reverence – any more than it is the earnestness of life to be a riding master. In my opinion, all such things are but jests, and sometimes rather poor ones at that. (Kierkegaard 1983, 133)

The protagonist in "The Poet", Councilor Mathiesen, is in Blixen's Danish version "Digteren" called Justitsraad Mathiesen,⁹ who is "Noget" ("somebody") and considered a "Velærværdighed" ("His Reverence") but who also turns out

⁸ This direct allusion to Kierkegaard's character "det unge Menneske" from *Gjentagelsen* is deliberately enhanced in Blixen's Danish translation. I will elaborate more on this quote later.

⁹ In Blixen's English original Mathiesen's Danish title is "Kammerraad, a chamber-councilor" (Blixen 1934, 375), but this is changed to "Justitsraad" in Blixen's Danish translation. In *Gjentagelsen* Kierkegaard also mentions the name Mathiesen, even though it otherwise has no importance for the narrative: "og hvor en Dansk kan faa Leilighed til at opfriske Mindet om Lars Mathiesen og Kehlet" (Kierkegaard 1843b, 42). Blixen might have combined "Justitsraad" and "Mathiesen" into "Justitsraad Mathiesen" in order to establish a clearer connection to *Gjentagelsen*. In the note section to *Syv fantastiske fortællinger* (Blixen 1934, 622) the character "fuldmægtig Mathiesen" from Meir Aron Goldschmidt's *Breve fra Choleratiden indeholdende en lille begivenhed* (1865) is mentioned as a possible source for the name "Mathiesen", even though he

to behave completely opposite of what we would normally expect from a man with such a title, which is a humorous reversal of the character Constantin contemplates in the above passage. Another significant starting point for Blixen’s plot development in “The Poet” is the idea that Constantin Constantius coins in *Gjentagelsen*, when he is thinking about how to solve the young man’s desperate situation: “Dersom jeg ikke selv var saa gammel, skulde jeg gjøre mig en Fornøjelse af at tage hende, alene for at Hjælpe Mennesket” (Kierkegaard 1843b, 135) (“If I myself were not so old, I would give myself the pleasure of taking her simply to help the man”) (Kierkegaard 1983, 216). Constantin contemplates this bold move as a means to put an end to the young man’s ethical scruples and melancholy, which stem from the fact that he is betrothed to a girl he loves but at the same time feels psychologically incapable of marrying, since she has ignited in him an unstoppable and prolific poetic creativity. Constantin never acts upon this audacious idea in *Gjentagelsen* and the girl eventually marries another man after the young man has fled to Sweden. It is, however, this unrealized love triangle, pregnant with picante possibilities that Karen Blixen stages in “The Poet” but with the opposite outcome in mind: The Councilor’s goal is *to create an unhappy love, not to solve one*, so he can sustain and feed the poetic creativity of his young man Anders. During a morning walk in the woods, the Councilor at first coins the idea of marrying Anders off to the newly arrived young widow Fransine, but when he recalls her lightness and grace, he fears that the idea is no good – that Anders might instead give up poetry and decide to take on the world with Fransine and move from Hirschholm. Suddenly, in a moment of epiphany, he discovers that he in fact has to do the opposite and a Devilish plan emerges:

His thoughts went a little further while the sun rose up higher. An unhappy love is an inspiring feeling. It has created the greatest works of history. A hopeless passion for his benefactor’s wife might make a young poet immortal; it was a dramatic thing to have in the house. The two young people would remain loyal to him, however much they suffer. (Blixen 1934, 327)

Hans Tanker steg, alt som Solen steg højere paa Himlen. Ulykkelig Kærlighed er *en mægtig beaandende Følelse*, den har før inspireret unge Mænd til Historiens største Digtværker. En haabløs Lidenskab for hans Velynders letfodede Hustru kunde meget vel komme til at udødeliggøre den unge Digter. Det kunde ogsaa blive et stort Drama at iagttage og følge med i. De to Unge vilde bevare deres Troskab imod ham, hvor gruligt de end blev pint. (Blixen 1935, 355–36, my italics)¹⁰

in Goldschmith’s narrative is just a subordinate “fuldmægtig” (managing clerk), who himself is manipulated by his friend Frantz Holm (Goldschmidt 1865, 55–57).

10 My italics show elements in the passage Blixen emphasized in her Danish translation in order to give extra detail to certain points. This allusion to Kierkegaard is not mentioned in the

By marrying Fransine, whom Anders Kube is in love with, the Councilor's plan is to make Anders a great poet, since his unhappy and unfulfilled love will be transformed into sublime poetic creativity as the above passage describes,¹¹ while the Councilor at the same time will be able to keep both of them in Hirschholm. Another Kierkegaard passage from "In vino veritas" (written two years after *Gjentagelsen*) articulated by Victor Eremita also informs this passage in "The Poet". Here Eremita states that a man only becomes a poet because of the girl he did not get:

Der er mangen Mand bleven Geni ved en Pige, mangen Mand bleven Helt ved en Pige, mangen Mand bleven Digter ved en Pige, mangen Mand bleven Helgen ved en Pige; – men han blev ikke Geni ved den Pige, han fik; thi med hende blev han kun Etatsraad; han blev ikke Helt ved den Pige, han fik, thi ved hende blev han kun General; han blev ikke Digter ved den Pige, han fik, thi ved hende blev han kun Fader; han blev ikke Helgen ved den Pige, han fik, thi han fik slet ingen og vilde kun have en eneste, som han ikke fik, ligesom Enhver af de Andre blev Geni, blev Helt, blev Digter ved den Piges Hjælp, de ikke fik. (Kierkegaard 1845, 40)

Many a man became a genius because of a girl, many a man became a hero because of a girl, many a man became a poet because of a girl, many a man became a saint because of a girl – but he did not become a genius because of the girl he got, for with her he became only a cabinet official; he did not become a hero because of the girl he got, for because of her he became only a general; he did not become a poet because of the girl he got, for because of her he became only a father; he did not become a saint because of the girl he got, for he got none at all and wanted only to have the one and only whom he did not get, just as each of the others became a genius, a hero, a poet with the aid of the girl he did not get. (Kierkegaard 1988, 59)

Young Peter Mathiesen did not become a poet, but instead married Madam Mathiesen and became Councilor Mathiesen of the town of Hirschholm (even though he never loved her and later did away with her). Now he wants to make a poet out of Anders instead, so that he can write poetry by proxy and at the same time achieve immortality as his Maecenas.

In the following I will show how Anders' love for Fransine, his melancholy, outburst of poetic creativity and the disintegrating friendship with the Councilor, closely follows the young man's development in *Gjentagelsen* up until the part where the Councilor decides to marry Fransine. Here the "The Poet" develops in new directions in order to realize other potentials in the characters from *Gjentagelsen* and develop a different outcome of the love triangle. In the final

note section to "Digteren" in the latest Danish edition of *Syv fantastiske fortællinger* (2012). DSL. København.

¹¹ Christian Braad Thomsen briefly mentions this connection to Kierkegaard in "The Poet" in his book *Boganis Gæstebud* but he does not elaborate further on it (Braad Thomsen 2010, 228).

scene Blixen also suggests a different interpretation of the poet personality, which is a reversal of Constantin's conclusion in the closing pages of *Gjentagelsen*.

The Melancholy Young Man: "Det unge Menneske" and Anders Kube

As previously mentioned Karen Blixen made the allusion to Søren Kierkegaard's character "det unge Menneske" ("the young man") from *Gjentagelsen* more obvious in her Danish version by calling Anders Kube "det unge Menneske" in this passage, where August von Schimmelmann evaluates his character and his future prospects of becoming a successful poet:

Grev Augustus roste Digtets Skønhed og mente, at den unge Digter havde fundet indsmigrende Ord i sin Skildring af den lille Elledronnings Skønhed. Han tænkte ved sig selv, at *det unge Menneske* i sin Natur havde et stærkt Drag af Sanselighed, hvormed der burde holdes Øje, hvis ikke den sikre Smag i hans Produktion skulde lide derunder. (Blixen 1935, 364–65, my italics)¹²

Count Augustus praised the beauty of the poem and thought the beauty of the little fairy queen charmingly put into words. *The boy*, he thought, had in him a very strong streak of primitive sensuality which would have to be watched if the tastefulness of his production were not to suffer. (Blixen 1934, 403, my italics)¹³

As the young man in *Gjentagelsen*: "Han havde allerede i nogen Tid været forelsket, men skjult det endog for mig" (Kierkegaard 1843b, 8) ("He had been in love for some time now, concealing it even from me" (Kierkegaard 1983, 134), Anders also hides his newfound love from the Councilor:

¹² August von Schimmelmann is also used as a proxy for another Kierkegaard allusion in "The Poet" (in this case well-known by the scholar-ship). It is the allusion to a passage in "Diapsalmata" about a sign that says "Her ruelles" (Kierkegaard 1843a, 18) ("Clothes mangled here") (Langbaum, 23). The paragraph is rephrased and developed by Schimmelmann in his conversation with the Councilor (Blixen 1934, 399). Here Blixen delivers a blow to religion as an illusion (and thus to Kierkegaard), but the implications of this quote and the discussion that arise from it lie outside the frame of this article.

¹³ Blixen made an interesting choice in the English original calling Anders "boy" in this passage and a couple of others. Otherwise she refers to Anders as "the young man" seven other places in the tale, which is similar to the normal English translation of Kierkegaard's term "det unge Menneske". Important information (and the clear allusion to Kierkegaard) is however lost in the English version since "menneske" is synonymous with "man" in English. "Human being" would be a more accurate translation, but it does not work properly in English.

All through the service the Councilor's mind was playing about with his recent impression. It had come to him at a seasonable moment, for he had lately been uneasy about his poet. This young slave of his had been singularly absent-minded, and even absent bodily from one or two of their Saturday suppers. There was in his whole manner an unconscious restlessness, and underneath it the sign of a melancholy about which the Councilor was anxious, for he knew well that he could find no remedy for it. (Blixen 1934, 385)

What the Councilor does not yet realize is that Anders has discovered Fransine at “La Liberté”, watched her nightly dance-sessions, and has fallen in love with her. Contrary to the young man, who confides his love to Constantin, Anders keeps his love for Fransine a secret all through the tale, even though the Councilor figures it out and starts to exploit it. Anders's melancholy condition upon falling in love is however similar to the one that strikes “det unge Menneske” in *Gjentagelsen*: “Store Gud! Tænkte jeg, en saadan Melancholi er endnu aldrig forekommen i min Praxis. At han var melancholsk vidste jeg nok, men at Forelskelse kunde virke saaledes paa ham!” (Kierkegaard 1843b, 11–12) (“Good God, I thought, never in my practice had I seen such melancholy as this. That he was melancholy, I knew very well – but that falling in love could affect him in this way!”) (Kierkegaard 1983, 136). In both cases their melancholy stems from the unhappy love affair, but the reasons are very different: the young man is melancholy because he is caught in the paradox that he is able to get the girl he loves, but feels psychologically incapable of marrying her. Anders on the contrary is melancholy because he is in love with a girl he in no possible way is able to get. At the same time the unrealized love affair makes both of the young men extremely creative poetically. Constantin notes about the young man: “En digterisk Productivitet vaagnede i ham efter en Maalestok, som jeg aldrig havde troet mulig.” (Kierkegaard 1843b, 15) (“A poetic creativity awakened in him on a scale I had never believed possible.”) (Kierkegaard 1983, 137–38) and Anders experiences a similar outburst of poetic creativity when he creates several significant long poems during the months he is in love with Fransine.

The big difference between the young man in *Gjentagelsen* and Anders is that the young man could very well have married the girl he was in love with. His love was requited and nothing stood between them, except for the young man's own psychological indisposition and ethical scruples. Anders finds himself in the complete opposite situation: He can't have Fransine, since she is betrothed to the Councilor and this is the material from which tragedies are created (*Romeo and Juliette*: the young lovers who can't have each other). Instead of fleeing from the unhappy love affair, as the young man eventually does in *Gjentagelsen*, Anders decides to stay. Contrary to the young man who hopes to receive his former life back free from guilt towards the young girl, Anders has instead made up his mind to take it on the very same day that Fransine is to marry the Councilor. When he can't have Fransine he prefers to die instead of

returning to his former life, or go on living as a poet in the sphere of ideas, which in the end becomes the fate of the young man in *Gjentagelsen* (I will get back to that later). In relation to woman this makes Anders the tragic hero in Blixen’s tale.

Repetition of the Archetypal Mentor-Protégé Relationship

In *Gjentagelsen* there are passages where Constantin Constantius’s description of his relationship with the young man borders what one would find in a description of a love relationship. At the same time Constantin does everything he can to manipulate the young man and stir up his melancholy for the sake of his own pleasure and enjoyment:

Det er omtrent 1 Aar siden, at jeg ret for Alvor blev opmærksom paa et ungt Menneske, hvem jeg tilforn allerede oftere havde berørt, fordi hans skønne Udvortes, det sjælfulde Udtryk i hans Øie næsten fristede mig (...) Ved Hjælp af disse skjødesløse, tilnærmende Conditor-Inclinationer havde jeg allerede draget ham til mig, og lært ham i mig at see en Fortrolig, hvis Tale paa mange Maader fristede det Melancholske i ham frem under Brydningens Form, idet jeg ligesom en Farinelli lokkede den sindssvage Konge ud af hans mørke Gjemme.¹⁴ (Kierkegaard 1843b, 8)

About a year ago, I became very much aware of a young man (which whom I had already often been in contact), because his handsome appearance, the soulful expression of his eyes, had an almost alluring effect upon me (...) Through casual coffee-shop associations, I had already attracted him to me and taught him to regard me as a confidant whose conversation in many ways lured forth his melancholy in refracted form, since I, like a Farinelli, enticed the deranged king out of his dark hiding place. (Kierkegaard 1983, 134–35)

When the two of them are waiting in Constantin’s home for a carriage that will take them north of Copenhagen to explore the forests, Constantin can’t help glancing at the young man with a special affection: “Jeg kunde ikke lade være af og til at skotte næsten forelsket til ham; thi en saadan Yngling er nok saa forførerisk at see paa som en ung Pige.” (Kierkegaard 1843b, 11) (“I could not resist stealing an almost enamored glance at him now and then, for a young man like that is just as enchanting to the eye as a young girl.”) (Kierkegaard

¹⁴ Here Constantin identifies with the famous castrate singer Carlo Broschi Farinelli (1705–1782), who in 1737 was hired by the Spanish Queen Elisabetta Farnese to cure her husband the Spanish King Philip V of his depression. Farinelli stayed with the King for of Spain and later his son Ferdinand VI for more than twenty years.

1983, 135). But Constantin's role as a father figure, his manipulation and cynicism, also becomes a burden for the young man, who wish he could finally show him off: "Gid jeg stod hos Dem, gid jeg med mit sidste Nei kunde løsrive mig fra Dem, som Don Juan fra Commandanten" (Kierkegaard 1843b, 102) ("Would that I stood beside you, that I could tear myself from you with the last "no" as Don Giovanni did from the Commandatore") (Kierkegaard 1983, 193). In a couple of crucial passages in "The Poet" we also get to know that the Councilor's relationship to Anders has the same affectionate nature as Constantin's:

Looking then, in the mild, glowing evening light, across the tea table at the two young people who were both so precious to him – *although their order might have surprised them* – the Councilor felt happy and in harmony with the universe. (Blixen 1934, 411, my italics)

When Anders finally discovers how the Councilor has manipulated him and Fransine, he shoots him as a last violent "no" to "the Commandatore" that the young man in *Gjentagelsen* does not have the courage to give Constantin: "Anders half lifted his gun, and without taking aim fired it off straight into the body of the old man" (Blixen 1934, 429) and the deadly injured Councilor thinks: "He was going to die. The young man, *whom he loved*, had meant him to die." (ibid., my italics). Again we find this scene to be a staging of a phantasy Constantin Constantius has in *Gjentagelsen*, when he thinks about how the young man killing him would prove the sincerity of his love for the girl:

Dog maaskee forstaar jeg ham ikke ganske, maaske skjuler han Noget, maaskee elsker han dog i Sandhed. Saa bliver vel Enden paa Historien, at han engang slaaser mig ihjel for at betroe mig det Allerhelligste. Man seer, at det at være lagttager er en farefuld Stilling. (Kierkegaard 1843b, 8)

But perhaps I do not fully understand him, perhaps he is hiding something. Maybe he does in truth love after all. Then it will probably all end with his murdering me in order to confide to me the holiest of the holy. It is obvious that being an observer is a dangerous position. (Kierkegaard 1983, 186)

Being an observer, as Councilor Mathiesen is in the temple in the final scene, can indeed be a dangerous position; we see the humor here, but even more importantly, Anders, when murdering the Councilor, also proves his love, since he confides to him "the holiest of holy": his love for Fransine. This is also how we are told by the narrator that Fransine perceives it, when she figures out that Anders has shot the Councilor: "At last the girl understood. Her lover had shot this old man (...) After she had gone from him, Anders had proved that he loved her. And only she and the old man knew (Blixen 1934, 435). In this one action Anders does two things the young man in *Gjentagelsen* is not able to do in his relation to Constantin and the young girl: He tells the Councilor no and so

proves his love for Fransine.¹⁵ Fransine requites it by finishing off the Councilor, which means that she will be swinging in the gallows with Anders and, thus, finally united with him in death: "Let Anders have done what he liked, he and she belonged to one another, were one" (ibid.).

Eunuchs Living by Proxy

As we saw in the quote in the previous paragraph Constantin compares himself to one of the most famous eunuchs in world history, the castrate singer Farinelli, when he describes his relation to the young man: "idet jeg ligesom en Farinelli lokkede den sindssvage Konge ud af hans mørke Gjemme" (Kierkegaard 1843b, 8). We find a similar comparison to a eunuch in "The Poet" where the Councilor's relationship to Anders is compared by the narrator to that of a "Kislar Aga toward a budding beauty of the seraglio" (Blixen 1934, 379).¹⁶ Constantin describes his relation to women in this way:

Hvad det andet Kjøn angaaer, har jeg min egen Mening, eller rettere, jeg har slet ingen, da jeg kun saare sjelden har seet en Pige, hvis Liv lod sig opfatte i en Kategori. Hun mangler som oftest den Consequents, der er fornøden for at man skal beundre eller foragte et Menneske. *En Kvinde er først bedragen af sig selv, før hun bedrager en Anden*, og derfor har man slet ingen Maalestok. (Kierkegaard 1843b, 139, my italics)¹⁷

As far as the other sex is concerned, I have my own opinion, or, more correctly, I have none at all, for I have rarely seen a girl whose life could be comprehended in a category. She usually lacks the consistency required for admiring or scorning a person. Before a woman deceives another, she first deceives herself, and therefore there is no criterion at all. (Kierkegaard 1983, 218)

Neither Constantin Constantius nor the Councilor has any physical interest in women, but only enjoys them through observation or manipulation, making them eunuchs in relation to women, albeit not technically. The scene where the Councilor during his nightly carriage trip back to Hirschholm spies on Fransine in awe, when she dances at La Liberté, is similar to the pleasure and exhilaration

¹⁵ This interpretation of the two of them being genuinely in love is supported by Aage Henriksen's analysis (Henriksen 1965, 17) even though I disagree with Henriksen's idea that Anders knows that the Councilor is in the temple with them in the final scene (ibid. 18).

¹⁶ The Kislar Aga was the black eunuch leader of the seraglio (harem) under the Ottoman Empire. Blixen later used Farinelli as a model for the character Marelli in "The Cardinal's First Tale" (*Last Tales*, 1957)

¹⁷ The Councilor expresses a similar idea when he elaborates on the special *code de femme* that he believes Fransine to subscribe to in order for her to perceive their marriage as a good thing (Blixen 1934, 414).

Constantin gets from spying on the young girl in the early morning after one of his many nightly carriage-trips due to his insomnia. Constantin is also excited when he watches the young girl at the Königsberg Theater and gets pleasure out of fantasizing about her, but his worst nightmare would be if she found out about his excited state of mind: “Havde hun blot anet min stumme halvforelskte Glæde, da var Alt fordærvet og ikke til at erstatte, ikke ved hele hendes Kjærlighed.” (Kierkegaard 1843b, 64) (“If she had even suspected my mute, half-infatuated delight, everything would have been spoiled beyond repair, even with all her love.”) (Kierkegaard 1983, 167) and he could never dream of approaching or interact with her. The young man describes Constantin’s personality like this:

er det ikke en Art Sindssvaghed, i den Grad at have underlagt enhver lidenskab, enhver Hjertets Rørelse, enhver Stemning under Reflexionens kolde Regimente. Er det ikke Sindssvaghed saaledes at være normal, blot Idee, ikke Menneske, ikke som vi Andre. (Kierkegaard 1843b, 96)

Is it not, in fact, a kind of mental disorder to have subjugated to such a degree every passion, every emotion, every mood under the cold regimentation of reflection! Is it not mental disorder to be normal in this way – pure idea, not a human being like the rest of us. (Kierkegaard 1983, 189)

The Councilor and Constantin are all head and reflection. Therefore there are important things in life that neither of them is able to do (to love a woman or write poetry) and that is why they are so fond of their young men and need them in their lives. Constantin’s relationship to the young man could be interpreted as an attempt to experience love and affection by proxy (since Constantin himself is unable to love in the way we normally understand the word) just as the Councilor has made his astute set-up in Hirschholm in order to use Anders for making love to his young bride and write poetry by proxy:

He discussed it much with the poet, and even advised him upon it, so that not a few of the Councilor’s own ideas and reflections were, in one way or another, echoed within the epos, and he was, during these summer months, *in a way making love, and writing poetry, to his bride by proxy* – a piquant situation, which would last until his wedding day (Blixen 1934, 415, my italics)

Who is the Poet?

It is thought provoking that the main character in “The Poet” is in fact not the poet in the story, which is, as we know, the young man Anders. Nevertheless, the Councilor is labeled “Poet” by Fransine in the dramatic final scene, right before she gives him his deathblow: “You!” she cried at him. “You Poet” (Blixen

1934, 436) ("Du," raabte hun til ham, "Du Digter! Poet!!) (Blixen 1935, 396). The explanation for this paradox is that the Councilor belongs to a very special type of poets, who do not produce, but instead *practices* poetry. Instead of writing poetry he turns life into poetry through diabolic manipulation, since his biggest enjoyment in life is the exhilaration and pleasure he feels when he can be the spectator of an unhappy love story. He is a collector of fine "fleurs du mal's"¹⁸ as erotic and picante (or evil) situations he creates in life that he can later recollect with enjoyment. This passage sums up this special type of behavior and how it relates to the overall flower metaphor:

The Councilor walked on, pleased. He thought of Count Schimmelmann's quotation: "He is a fool who knows not the half to be more than the whole." This long-forgotten incident [his boyhood love, Nanna, my comment] was a little flower in his life, in the garland of his life, a field flower, a wild forget-me-not. There were not a few flowers, violets, pansies, in his life. Would this night put a rose into the garland?" (Blixen 1934, 424)

These "flowers" are erotic situations that the Councilor infuses with dread and destruction: He terrorizes his mentally unstable wife using a pansy so that she falls back into insanity, eventually dies; and the rose he hopes to put in his garland tonight is Fransine showing herself naked to the devastated Anders Kube in the small temple. When the Councilor thinks about how to repeat this situation from Karl Gutzkow's novel *Wally. Die Zweiflerin*¹⁹ (1835) with Anders and Fransine in the roles of Wally and Cäsar, his conception of the idea is described like this: "Let the critics say that such things do not happen; that does not really matter, for a new variety of flower has been forced in the frame of imagination" (Blixen 1934, 416–17) ("Lad kun Kritikerne sige, at den Slags Ting ikke sker i Verden. Det har ikke noget at sige, en ny Blomsterart er i alle Tilfælde drevet frem i Fantasiens Mistbænk") (Blixen 1935, 377).²⁰

In *Gjentagelsen* we seem to encounter a similar paradox with regard to who is in fact the poet in the narrative. Towards the end of the narrative Constantin writes that the young man he has created is a poet, but that he himself is not:

Det unge Menneske, som jeg har ladet blive til, han er Digter. Mere kan jeg ikke gjøre; thi jeg kan i det Højeste komme saavidt, at jeg kan tænke mig en Digter og ved min Tænken frembringe ham, selv kan jeg ikke blive Digter, som ogsaa min Interesse ligger paa et andet Sted. Min opgave har beskæftiget mig reent æsthetisk og psykologisk. (Kierkegaard 1843b, 152)

¹⁸ This is a slight rephrasing of the title of Charles Baudelaire's poetry collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) (*Flowers of evil*).

¹⁹ The title in Blixen's "The Poet": *Wally: Die Zweifleriti* (sic!) is wrong (Blixen 1934, 415).

²⁰ Note how Blixen has sharpened the fleurs du mal-metaphor by using the Danish word "Mistbænk". English: hotbed.

The young man I have brought into being is a poet. I can do no more, for the most I can do is to imagine a poet and to produce him by my thought. I myself cannot become a poet, and in any case my interest lies elsewhere. My task has engaged me purely esthetically and psychologically. (Kierkegaard 1983, 228)

It is a paradox that the author of a narrative about a young man and his unhappy love affair denies that he himself is a poet, but claims that only his imaginative creation is. Constantin backs this claim by summing up certain differences in their personalities; the young man is emotional, bordering the religious, whereas Constantin is pure intellect and unable to make a religious movement, which in his own eyes disqualifies him as a poet. By labeling the Councilor “The Poet” Blixen seems to suggest the opposite of Constantin. In order to be a poet one needs the intellectual and manipulative skills and the ability to dedicate oneself completely to an idea no matter the costs and live by the motto: “He is a fool who knows not the half to be more than the whole.” These are qualities that both Constantin and the Councilor have, but the young man and Anders lack. The reversal of this set-up in *Gjentagelsen* is carried out in this way: Constantin is a poet who has written a narrative in which he denies being a poet and instead claims his imaginative character to be one, whereas the Councilor, who is not a poet, tries to create a poet in real life (Anders) but in the end is himself labeled a poet! In the closing lines in *Gjentagelsen* Constantin furthermore claims: “Min kjære Læser! Du vil nu forstaae, at Interessen dreier sig om det unge Menneske, medens jeg er en forsvindende Person.” (Kierkegaard 1843b, 156) (“My dear reader, you will now understand that the interest focuses on the young man, whereas I am a vanishing person.”) (Kierkegaard 1983, 230). Blixen seems to see it differently. She (rightfully) sees that Constantin is the central figure in *Gjentagelsen* and in “The Poet” she creates a similar type (albeit way more radical) and lets him play the main role in a narrative, but she does it by letting her main character do the exact opposite movement of Constantin’s. Blixen creates a story, in which everything a poet does only in spirit and in fiction (planning the plot, manipulate the characters and the events, living by proxy²¹ through the characters and getting pleasure out of the omnipotent position) is carried out by the Councilor in the flesh, in actuality. Conversely, Constantin arranges the narrative so we believe the events have happened in real life, but in the end tells us that it has only been a sort of spiritual exercise; that his narrative is only fiction. This way of reversing the spiritual and the actual Blixen repeated twenty-eight years later, when she made the opposite movement in a response to another of Kierkegaard’s works:

²¹ Which is ultimately what literature and film offer us human beings: To experience horror, triumph, sex and tragedy by proxy through the characters in a fictional story-world.

What Johannes Forførelsen carries out in the flesh in “Forførelsens Dagbog” (seduces Cordelia physically), she lets J. W. Cazotte try to carry out in spirit only in “Ehregard”, when he tries to seduce Ehregard avoiding any physical touch whatsoever (Bunch 2013).

Kierkegaard and Blixen: The Demonic Esthete

In the closing lines of his essay *Karen Blixen og marionetterne* (Karen Blixen and the Marionettes, my translation) from 1952, Aage Henriksen establishes the first substantial connection between Søren Kierkegaard and Karen Blixen.²² Henriksen finishes his essay with this bold, yet cryptic, statement:

og med det sidste ord føre tanken hen på Søren Kierkegaard, som skrev en bog, der hedder *Gjentagelsen*. I dette begreb kan Søren Kierkegaard og Karen Blixen mødes og i frygten for den dæmoniske æstetiker, men de mødes kun ved, fra denne skikkelse, at gå i modsatte retninger og følge to meget forskellige arter af fromhed. (here quoted from Henriksen 1965, 32)

and with one last word point to Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote a book called *Gjentagelsen*. In this concept Søren Kierkegaard and Karen Blixen can meet and in the fear of the demonic esthete, but they only meet in so far as they both depart from this figure and go in two opposite directions and follow two very different types of piety. (my translation)

Henriksen is correct when he points out that both Kierkegaard and Blixen have *Gjentagelsen* and the demonic esthete in common, but it seems to me that “fear” here is the wrong word.²³ Neither Kierkegaard, nor Blixen, fears the demonic esthete; they see right through him. In Kierkegaard’s work he is a haunted elderly bachelor caught in the demonic (Constantin Constantius, Victor Eremita and Modehandleren), who is unable to enter actuality through the ethical or to make a religious movement. In Blixen’s version, he is a powerful eunuch-like elderly bachelor (Rosendaal,²⁴ the Councilor, Prince Potenziani,²⁵ Mr. Clay and J. W. Cazotte²⁶) who in various ways tries to assert omnipotence in life by ma-

²² The essay was first given as two radio talks in May 1952 before Henriksen came to know Karen Blixen in person and later eagerly discussed Kierkegaard as we know from their prolific letter correspondence 1952–54 (Henriksen 1985). Henriksen was in the process of writing a doctoral thesis about Kierkegaard during these years. Gyldendal published it in 1954 under the title *Kierkegaards Romaner* (Kierkegaard’s Novels, my translation) (Henriksen 1954).

²³ Henriksen later moderated this opinion (Poul Behrendt pers. comment).

²⁴ In “Carnival” Rosendaal is dressed as a Chinese eunuch (60).

²⁵ Who is impotent.

²⁶ Who is a virgin.

nipulating the people who are close to him and whose pain and annihilation he secretly and sadistically enjoys. Karen Blixen submits these eunuch-like demonic esthetes to the comic through nemesis; a nemesis that hits them when their omnipotence is out-powered by a source or a person they thought they could control. The comic lies in the discrepancy between their omnipotent natures and their sexual incapability, their will to power and how they in the end are out-powered by fate.²⁷ In “The Poet” we find the Councilor subjected to the comic on his death-bed, when he firmly believes to be in the safe hands of Goethe and on his way to a Weimarian Elysium, when he in fact is in the hands of Karen Blixen, who is sending him straight to hell: “he was thrown down in three or four great leaps from one cataract to the other. And meanwhile, from all sides, like an echo in the engulfing darkness, winding and rolling in long caverns, her last word was repeated again and again.” (Blixen 1934, 437).

To conclude: The major difference between Blixen and Kierkegaard’s demonic esthetes is that Kierkegaard’s characters gets away with their manipulative behavior without nemesis striking, but that is never the case for Karen Blixen’s demonic esthetes, who in the end must all face nemesis and the deep irony of life. Thus, to expound Henriksen’s enigmatic closing line about the different nature of Kierkegaard and Blixen’s approaches to the demonic esthete and their different paths of piousness: Blixen took the path of humor, whereas Kierkegaard took the path of the religious.

Repetition in *Gjentagelsen* and in “The Poet”

Most scholars agree that Kierkegaard’s *Gjentagelsen* is one of his most difficult works and as such does not offer an overall definition of the concept of repetition but instead unfolds as a polyphonic exploration of the concept with no final result.²⁸ It is outside the scope of this article to explore and explain all the different notions and variations of repetition put forward in *Gjentagelsen*, but

²⁷ Constantin can indeed be regarded as a comical character, even though scholars rarely perceive him that way. But everything Constantin sets out to do, either fails or gets out of hand, even though he arrogantly believes he has it all figured out. He is in fact a bit of a Don Quixote, even though it can be difficult to see, since his opinions are put forward with such an authority (and Kierkegaard furthermore grants him the authority to take everything back in the final scene), so we don’t immediately see the comic.

²⁸ For example Henriksen 1954, Tøjner 1996 and Tjønneland 1996. In his Ph. D. thesis “Tyvesprogets mester” Mads Sohl Jessen even claims that the concept of repetition should mainly be understood as a parody in relation to J. L. Heiberg (Jessen 2010).

here only deal with the concept, as long as it enlightens and connects Blixen's "The Poet" to *Gjentagelsen*.

All of Constantin's attempts to orchestrate and experience a successful repetition fail: he is unable to *reset* the young man and get him out of his melancholy and spleen and when he instead tries to find repetition by repeating an earlier trip to Berlin, he finds that things have changed and that he is unable to recreate his feelings and impressions from the first trip. He returns to Copenhagen in disappointment only to find that his valet on his own accord has rearranged his apartment in order to conduct a major cleaning, which shatters Constantin's last hope of making a repetition in homely surroundings. After these three defeats Constantin finally concludes: "Jeg indsaar, at der ingen Gjentagelse er til, og min tidligere Betragtning af Livet havde seiret." (Kierkegaard 1843b, 71) ("I perceived that there is no repetition, and my earlier conception of life ways victorious." (Kierkegaard 1983, 171).

In "The Poet" the Councilor also makes various attempts to make a repetition. He uses Anders and Fransine as guinea pigs, when he tries to make a great poet out of Anders, which is an attempt to repeat the love-story of some of the greatest poets from world literature for whom an unfulfilled love-relationship ignited their genius (Dante-Beatrice, Goethe-Lotte and Kierkegaard-Regine).²⁹ The Councilor also tries to create another type of repetition, when he attempts to repeat a situation from literature – the piquant meeting from Gutzkow's novel – and stage it in real life with Anders and Fransine in the roles of Wally and Cäsar. In both cases he fails, when his puppets revolt, and in the end he even gets himself killed. Based on Constantin and the Councilor's practical experiences with repetition we understand that certain types of repetition pertaining to actuality do not seem possible (or at last they seem to be impossible to *stage*). This leads us to believe that repetition is only possible in spirit, which is also what the young man claims in *Gjentagelsen* towards the end of the narrative. After having received a handful of sad and desperate letters from the young man over a period of half a year, Constantin finally gets a letter, where the young man triumphantly claims that he has experienced a repetition:

Hun er gift (...) Jeg er atter mig selv; her har jeg Gjentagelsen; jeg forstaaer Alt, og Tilværelsen forekommer mig skjønnere end nogensinde (...) Er der da ikke en Gjentagelse? Fik jeg ikke Alt dobbelt? Fik jeg ikke mig selv igjen, netop saaledes, at jeg dobbelt maatte føle Betydningen deraf? Og hvad er en Gjentagelse af jordisk Gods, der er ligegyldigt mod Aandens Bestemmelse, i Sammenligning med en saadan Gjentagelse? *Kun Børnene*

²⁹ *Gjentagelsen* is one out of three works (the two other being "Forførerens Dagbog" and "Skyldig? Ikke Skyldig?") where Kierkegaard in different variations repeated his own unhappy love story with Regine.

fik Job ikke dobbelt, fordi et Menneskeliv ikke saaledes lader sig fordoble. Her er kun Aandens Gjentaelse mulig, om end den end i Timeligheden aldrig bliver saa fuldkommen som i Evigheden, der er den sande Gjentaelse (Kierkegaard 1843b, 142)

She is married (...) I am myself again. Here I have repetition; I understand everything, and life seems more beautiful to me than ever (...) Is there, not, then a repetition? Did I not get everything double? Did I not get myself again and precisely in such a way that I might have a double sense of its meaning? Compared with such a repetition, what is a repetition of worldly possessions, which is indifferent toward the qualification of the spirit? Only his children did Job not receive double again, for a human life cannot be redoubled that way. Here only repetition of the spirit is possible, even though it is never so perfect in time as in eternity, which is the true repetition. (Kierkegaard 1983, 221–222)

According to the young man repetition is possible, but only in spirit. The young man got himself again in the sense that he is now free from guilt towards the girl, which is a repetition of his guilt-free mental condition from before he met the girl (Henriksen, 117): “Naar Ideen kalder, da forlader jeg Alt (...) jeg svigter Ingen, jeg bedrøver Ingen ved at være den tro, min Aand bedrøves ikke ved at jeg maa bedrøve en Anden.” (Kierkegaard 1843b, 143) (“When the idea calls, I abandon everything (...) I defraud no one, I sadden no one by being loyal to it; my spirit is not saddened by my having to make another one sad.”) (Kierkegaard 1983, 221). We find a similar situation in “The Poet”, when the Councilor repeats the situation with the pansy that made his wife loose her mind and successfully manages to bring her back to this former state of insanity. This is a negative reversal of the young man’s happy experience with “Aandens Gjentaelse” and an ironic variation of how one can also get oneself again in spirit. The way the Councilor is able to recollect his erotic “fleurs du mal’s” in spirit with pleasure and security also seems to be an ironic variation over the bold opening statement that Constantin put forward on the first pages in *Gjentaelsen*: “Gjentaelsens Kjærlighed er i Sandhed den ene lykkelige. Den har ligesom Erindringens ikke Haabets Uro, ikke Opdagelsens ængstende Eventyrlighed, men heller ei Erindringens Vemod, den har Øieblikkets salige Sikkerhed” (Kierkegaard 1843b, 4). (“Repetition’s love is in truth the only happy love. Like recollection’s love, it does not have the restlessness of hope, the uneasy adventurousness of discovery, but neither does it have the sadness of recollection – it has the blissful security of the moment.”) (Kierkegaard 1983, 132)

Belonging to the sphere of spirit literature is also able to repeat literature, since characters, plots and ideas are preserved in the immortal piece of art and can be repeated in the succeeding works an infinite amount of times (as well as by us readers) following the dialectics of repetition: “Gjentaelsens Dialektik er let; thi det, der gjentages, har været, eller kunde det ikke gjentages, men netop det, at har været, gjør Gjentaelsen til det Nye” (Kierkegaard 1843b, 34). (“The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been – otherwise it

could not be repeated – but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new”) (Kierkegaard 1983, 149). “The Poet” can thus be regarded, not only as a repetition and restaging of the plot structure in *Gjentagelsen*, but also as a part of a longer chain of repetitions of the archetypal unhappy love triangle from world literature to which we find many allusions in “The Poet”.³⁰ The allusions are organized as a Kierkegaardian Chinese puzzle, in which one love triangle is enclosed in the other: Loke-Nanna-Balder (*Balders død* by Johannes Ewald, 1773), Albert-Lotte-Werther (*The Sorrows of Young Werther* by J. W. Goethe, 1774), The Ambassador of Sardinia-Wally-Cäsar (*Wally* by K. Gutzkow, 1835) and in last box Constantin Constantius-the young girl-the young man from Kierkegaard’s *Gjentagelsen* (1843). This strategy of repetition is an integral part of Blixen’s poetics. As she said at the foot of the Acropolis, when she visited Greece with Knud W. and Benedicte Jensen in May 1951: “al Poesi begynder ved Gjentagelsen, og hvad særligt vilde een Søjle være – men disse Søjlerækker” (Jensen 1953, 278–79) (All poetry starts with repetition and what would one column be in itself – but these rows of columns, my translation). Thus, we can regard “The Poet” as one of the columns in the long line of love triangles that together make up the temple of world literature and conclude by quoting Harold Bloom who uses Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* in his influential essay “Kenosis or Repetition and Discontinuity” to describe the dialectics of poetry and tradition: “The strong poet survives because he lives the discontinuity of an ‘undoing’³¹ and an ‘isolating’ repetition, but he would cease to be a poet unless he kept living the continuity of ‘recollecting forwards,’ of breaking forth into a freshening that yet repeats his precursor’s achievements” (Bloom 1973, 83).

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³⁰ Blixen also repeats and explores this type of love triangle from “The Poet” in other tales, for example “Sorrow-Acre”, “The Immortal Story”, “The Tempest” and “Ehrengard” where an older man in various ways tries to manipulate two young lovers.

³¹ As defined by Fenichel: “in undoing, one more step is taken. Something positive is done which, actually or magically, is the opposite of something which, again actually or in imagination, was done before ... (quoted in Bloom 1973, 80).

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